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MAKING VISUAL NOISE

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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in the College of Art and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the combination of multi-cultural and historical influences from my personal life experiences, my creations of odd juxtapositions of space, complex pattern and new iconography in my paintings, reveal more than merely a representational image to a viewer. Although my subjects may vary from the anonymous to media celebrity, it is their relationship to me that influences the creation of my static animation and visual noise.

For Roy and Ryan

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout my many years of making art, I have been consciously creating work based on my interpretation of the “Horror Vacui”.

¹The Oxford American Dictionary describes Horror Vacui as a term from the mid 19th century to describe a “fear or dislike of leaving empty spaces, especially in an artistic composition.” The modern Latin translation literally means, “horror of a vacuum.” But I have now learned that although my work does appear to make use of the Horror Vacui, it is not in the literal sense, a fear of open spaces or disliking empty spaces. I feel no horror of a vacuum.

Nevertheless, I began to seek out explanations as to why I was so attracted to filling up my canvases this way. I found part of my answer from the McKenzie Fine Art, Inc. website. The website asks, “Does Nature really abhor a vacuum?”¹ It also goes on to say the “...theory regarding the ‘fear of open space’ was disproved centuries ago, but for artists, the desire to create work where all (or nearly all) the space is filled stems from a number of innovations....”²

The McKenzie Fine Art site also discusses the “Horror Vacui” as celebrating “...complex and obsessive execution, dense mark making...intricate pattern making, and ornamentation...” The site also mentioned the almost Zen like state of mind that could be achieved in the obsessive creation of some of these works.³ This made more sense to me. It also explained why so many

¹ McKenzie, “Horror Vacui,” McKenzie Fine Art Inc., 12 June -1 August 2008, [Mckenziefineart.com](http://www.mckenziefineart.com), 16 February 2011
<<http://www.mckenziefineart.com/exhib/HorrorVacuiexhib.html>>.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

historical, indigenous peoples appeared to use forms of the Horror Vacui in their works. They did not fear a vacuum or open spaces, they were decorating, pattern making and using this in the ornamentation of their crafts.

My use of the “Horror Vacui” was clarified by looking back at my own history and artistic influences. I came to realize that many of the cultural influences I had experienced during my life were at work in my art. I was filling the quiet emptiness of the blank canvas with a fullness of experience, activating the surface, making it noisy and loud, thereby creating visual noise, and static animation.



Figure 1: Esater Eggs

CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCES

Early cultural influences:

Several unique heritages have influenced me. My maternal great-great-grand parents arrived and lived within a Slavic community along the Hudson River in New York State that was once a Dutch colony, and which still retained many of its Dutch influences. My grandparents and their neighbors spoke Russian, Hungarian, Slovak and English. Colonists and regional people made up the paternal side of my family, with several generations living in the Ramapo and Campgaw mountain regions of New York and North Jersey. Their ancestors were basket makers, painters and craftsmen.

The works, history, and heritage of the people from these locations were my first influences. The interior paintings, mosaics, icons and rituals of the Russian Orthodox and Slavic Catholic Churches form my earliest memories of art. They were images from which I would learn, and both the images and lessons would stay with me. I was already combining cultures within my own family and from the region we lived in.

Art historical inspirations:

As a middle and high school student in New York State, I was exposed to museums, galleries and local fine art and craft artists. I was fortunate; the schools I attended had wonderful and talented art teachers. One high school art teacher, Mrs. Rosetta Lentriche, will always stand out as an important inspiration; she saw promise in my work and in my enthusiasm for making art and studying images, so she encouraged me to continue making art and studying art history.

It was at this time that I first discovered art books on the Dutch Masters, and became intrigued with portrait paintings and capturing the likeness of others. Of all the portraits I studied, those of the Northern Renaissance artists, especially paintings by the Dutch and Flemish masters, were what I was most interested in. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, and Hans Holbein the Younger were my favorites and I worked hard to discover the formal elements in these amazing compositions. I was especially interested in the technical skills of both Van Eyck's and Holbein's costume decoration. I was fascinated by the allegory. Inventing my own iconography and symbolism became an important goal.



Figure 2: *The Deësis*, 1324,
detail of the Ghent Altarpiece by
Hubert and Jan van Eyck

Iconography:

Over the years, a personal iconography developed and grew, appearing in my paintings repeatedly. While at first, the significance of each icon may not have been fully conscious, I have come to know more about what they mean and signify in each painting. I use these icons in

different contexts; and I find as they are repeated and developed in various contexts, they acquire richer and more compelling symbolism.

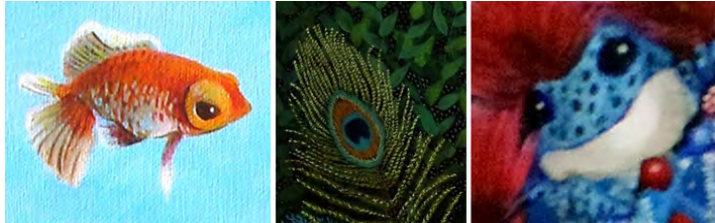


Figure 3: *Detail of fish, peacock feather and blue frog*

The fish I have studied and painted while living in the Caribbean inspire the many depictions of fish in my paintings. I use these symbolic images to signify ideas or thoughts conveyed by the sitter who is the subject of the painting. When an individual subject changes their train of thought, they receive another fish. Frogs are secrets; green frogs are little secrets and blue frogs are dark secrets. The peacock feathers are inspired by my work in 1984 as a costume designer for a show in the newly opened Aladdin Theatre in Aruba. On the stage these feathers are considered a bad omen for the cast. This is one of many theatrical superstitions and it is considered taboo for the stage in the U.S. I remember I flew to Florida and drove down to Key West where New Orleans' mask maker, Mike Stark, was getting ready to create work for Fantasy Fest. I gave him my drawings and we discussed what supplies he had on hand, which among other oddities included a large supply of peacock feathers. They were exactly what I was looking for, so I chose to break with theatrical tradition and use them on costumes for the show. Today, I still continue to use them in my paintings, and I continue to break taboos.

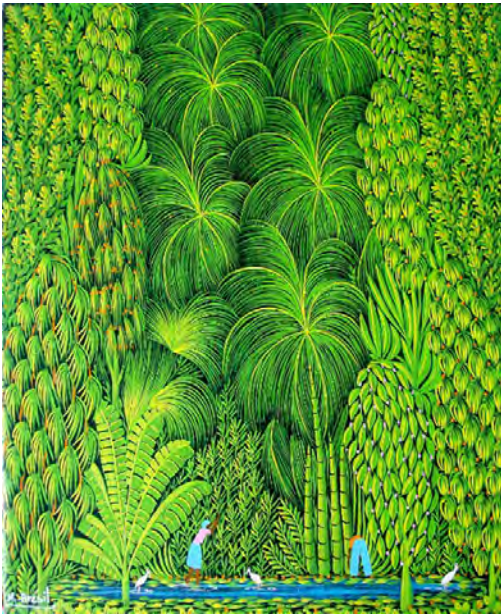


Figure 4: *Paysage*, Henri Robert Bresil



Figure 5: *La Père Tanguy*, Vincent Van Gogh, 1887

Caribbean Influences:

When I was a young adult I moved to the Caribbean and stayed there for 30 years. My early cultural influences came along with me and over the years, in my new environment, I adopted new ones. It was interesting to see how much these island regions were heavily influenced by European and American art; many of the island's local artists were trying to conform to those influences. One island stood out. Haiti, throughout its history, has had a heavy French background alongside of its equally important African influences. Haitian artists have combined both influences: keeping the basic formality of European painting compositions while looking like naïve folk art rendered in rich and vibrant Caribbean colors. The Haitian artists told stories about island life, created icons, revealed gods, and told history. I was intrigued. An opportunity arose for me to take my first trip to purchase artwork. I went to Haiti and it turned out to be a major cultural influence for my work. While in Port-au-Prince, I absorbed the culture, the people, and art of Haiti, under the guidance and tutelage of Roger Coster Sr. and his wife Laura, and through visits to Issa El Saieh, the legendary Haitian art gallery owner. This art was very

different from the rural folk art of North America. The compositions suggested a simple boldness, but were more complex, allegorical, and they created what I came to call, “visual noise”. I was inspired by this Haitian art just as Van Gogh had been inspired by the Japanese prints to which he was exposed in Antwerp, in the year 1885⁴. Although Van Gogh had never traveled to Japan, he had changed his color palate, and incorporated patterns from the prints he had seen. I needed to comprehend this thing I was referring to as “visual noise” and I wanted to incorporate it into my own work.

Haitian-like images and colors began to creep into the backgrounds of my first portrait paintings. I felt this added visual interest to the formal portraits I was working on, however, I knew I needed to change the way the actual figure in the portrait was painted as well. The subject and background needed to be combined to achieve the “noise” I was looking for. My colors became bolder: patterns and dots appeared in decorative costumes, my flesh tones changed, and I was no longer trying to paint the illusion of Tromp l’oeil. Now, I was embellishing it.

⁴Shelly Morgan, “ Japanese Influence on European Art,” http://www.ehow.com/about_6692583_japanese-influence-european-art.html#ixzz1EQrbFCqP>. eHow.com., July 3, 2010 <

CHAPTER 3: PROCESS

Making Color, Pattern and Visual Noise:

Until I came to Florida in 2006, I worked exclusively with oil paint on canvas. When I found myself back in the academic world, everyone was using acrylic paint and I wanted it to behave like oil. In the beginning, I honestly felt, I was creating plastic place mats. Previously I used acrylic paint on t-shirts for my children and at that time I couldn't imagine it would be considered a serious media in the future. It did not react like oil paint: it was impossible to blend, the colors were not the same, it was too translucent, it did not have the weight of oil paints and it dried too quickly. After months of experimenting, I was left with no choice except to learn to paint in a new way and much faster.

Determined to master the craft of making acrylic paint mimic oil paint, I looked back at the Flemish painters and studied their glazing techniques. Upon learning this, I no longer attempted to blend acrylic; instead I developed glazing skills by creating layers of hues and tints trapped in transparent glaze mediums to build my illusions of light and depth.

Portraiture and the Art of Collaboration/Collaboration:

One of my first acrylic portraits was a painting of a little girl named Britta. This was the beginning of a new series of work based on collaboration between myself and in this case, the young child who is the subject of the work. During the process of making this painting I was interested in thinking about portraiture in a new way. Instead of working to replicate an image of the child, I sought iconography that would signify aspects of not just her image, but also other attributes which might not be readily revealed to a casual viewer. I wanted to give the painting

more depth in both meaning and richness of surface and composition. Britta became the focus of the work through the collaborative effort of getting closer to her as an individual and as a subject.

Before I began this painting, I took another close look at some of the major, early Northern Renaissance portrait paintings and studying their formal compositions. Those portraits were about making an image of the personality, culture, status, and context of the subject.

With their complex structures based on rectangles upon rectangles, those compositions suggested windows into the content of the subject. Likewise, I chose to utilize the window/rectangle format to create my painting, while also incorporating Caribbean color and imaginative iconography.



Figure 6: *Britta*, acrylic on canvas,
18" x 24", 2006

The landscape, flowers and coral are from Britta's home in Aruba. The portrait not only shows Britta's likeness, but also reveals information about where she lives. The road going off into the background suggests her future, not knowing where the road will lead.

After completing this painting and wanting to continue this research. I decided to paint two acquaintances: Nargges and Beatrice, fellow non-traditional art students from the University of Central Florida. This offered an opportunity for me to continue painting subjects of whom I had personal knowledge; I was eager to explore the idea of telling something more about the subject than their likeness alone. I followed the same process I had used in Britta's Painting: Formal Northern Renaissance portrait poses and rectangular compositions, with the use of allegory.

I gathered information in a collaborative way: interviewing and photographing them while we spoke. As they talked about their homes, flowers from their native countries, and many other things, I counted the number of times they changed the subject of the conversation. The portraits were to contain images and icons related to them, the subject, some would be obvious, while others would contain meaning known only to each person and myself. For example: I learned Nargges is from Iran, and a Persian rug is depicted behind her, barely visible in the background. The pomegranate, is an icon she uses in her own paintings, is laden with personal symbolism, and is the formal symbol of Iran. The small section of a Mexican serape is Nargges' secret.

Beatrice is from Ghana. She is dressed in her own traditional costume and the flag of her country hangs behind her head. The Canary is a small bird that is exported from Ghana to many countries just as Beatrice was transported to the US as a young girl. The German seal represents her husband's country of origin and her hand clearly shows her wedding ring.



Figure 7: *Nargges*, acrylic on canvas,
18'' x 24'', 2007



Figure 8: *Beatrice*, acrylic on canvas,
18'' x 24'', 2007

Non-Collaboration:

Shortly after painting these subject portraits I began the *Carnaval* series, which was an entirely different undertaking. There was no personal connection with these new subjects. At the time I was having difficulties finding individuals to sit for portraiture, and I wanted to try something different; however, I was not attracted to creating images peopled by models who looked like they were taken from the pages of fashion magazines. The decision was made to gather my information from a distance, and so I began searching out random people: by taking pictures at weddings, parks, and diners. I also searched for appealing images I could find on-line.

By using subjects who were unknown to me I felt more comfortable and free to create iconography without the concern of remaining true to the individuals. I wanted to create visual noise around this new imagery of people.



Figure 9: *The Waiter*, 30" x 40", acrylic on canvas, 2010

These new compositions began with images of people that grabbed my attention. These characters were then inserted into settings invented from my imagination. Each subject was dressed as a carnival participant, their adornment drawn from first-hand knowledge of my Caribbean *Carnaval*. They are not painted as locals from the islands. Instead I chose to paint them as tourists who came, and still come to the islands to participate in the celebrations. My

fish icons, static noise, and a new icon, the "Taboo" peacock feathers were also added to the composition.

The background in figure 9: "The Waiter" is the Plaza in downtown Oranjestad, Aruba. The feathered mask, headdress and table's centerpiece are common Carnival celebration items, but the fruits and Lobster being served are not native Aruban items, and are symbols, much like the tourist.

Transition:

In an attempt to transition from solely using island influences to using contemporary Floridian influences, I decided to paint subjects from Florida. This meant going back to painting individuals. Although this group of paintings did not have the *Carnaval* attire, the rich patterning I had indulged in the *Carnaval* paintings would resurface in a different way. The first painting in the group was a woman named Becca. My signature iconography was continued, and the patterns in the clothing were more imaginative and embellished. The major difference in these paintings had to do with their backgrounds, which were painted differently than in my earlier works. The background no longer told a story about where the sitter was from. Additionally, some of the icons were placed in the open while others were hidden. These paintings also brought me back full-circle to my earlier focus of the subject-portrait and a reevaluation of my use of Gestalt principles. In this series of paintings, grouping, camouflage and repetition, were more important than specifying, for example, a building that might suggest a location. I came to know these individuals; therefore their visual noise was softer. With J. Mendoza's painting I did not create an imaginative pattern on his clothing. In this case I was able to keep his uniform prominent because the camouflage provided the noise I was looking for. The fish were mostly hidden in

this painting because the majority of the subject's thoughts were hidden. He had just returned from Iraq and would shortly be on his way to Afghanistan. In painting Mrs. L, I continued the same background treatment as I had used in the Becca and J. Mendosa paintings. Likewise, as I had done in the Mendosa painting, I kept the sitter's clothing. In this case it was Mrs. L's Wedding Day. The visual noise in this painting is very still.



Figure 10: *Becca*, 24" x 48",
acrylic on canvas, 2010



Figure 11 *J. Mendoza*, , 24" x 30", acrylic on canvas, 2010



Figure 12: *Mrs. L.*, 24" x 30 ", acrylic on canvas, 2010

With the completion of this painting I knew I was ready to move on. I wanted to go back to creating louder noise and I was also interested in adding a little humor and entertainment into my work.

Voyeurism:

Continuing to transition into contemporary, US-inspired imagery, I have recently begun painting a more politically charged series of voyeuristic paintings. The subjects vary, but like the *Carnaval* series, I do not know the subject's personally; however, I do see them almost daily. Constantly bombarded with their images in the media, they all have varying levels of cult, celebrity status. They are well known members of opposing political parties or opposing media outlets. These subjects are more regional and national. Their celebrity makes them known to the viewers of my paintings, unlike my earliest works, which were populated by actual individuals who were being introduced in my paintings as subject matter for the first time. In this series, I am not choosing either side of the political arena. Someone in the media does the interview and I am watching. I find that in not knowing them personally, I can create more visual noise around them. These subjects are being painted as attendees of festive parties much in the way that I had painted the *Carnaval* series. They are ironic, visual puns of "Political Parties".

Hillary C. is the first subject in the Political Parties series. The viewer can read the contemporary iconography in this painting to decipher which political party she belongs to, and in which state she has resided in. An observant viewer can view patriotism as an event, so much so that one can almost hear the visual noise. The invented iconography here is two-fold. The little blue frogs indicate some secrets that others and myself may suspect, or know. The larger, attractive, but very aggressive a, territorial and sometimes toxic, Blue Powder Surgeon fish is rich in symbolism.



Figure 13: *Hillary C.*, 24" x 30", acrylic on canvas, 2010

The most recent painting in this series is “The Polemicist Tea Party, waiting in the Green Room”. Inspired by an Alice in Wonderland tea party photo taken by Anny Lebowitz for a Vogue layout, the tea party is made up of several “well-known” American, news-media celebrities. It contains goldfish, frogs, and a peacock feather. I also added grouper fish, well known to swallow its prey whole, and Triggerfish that are substitutes for painting guns.



Figure 14: *Polemicist Tea Party, waiting in the Green Room*, 60" x 70", acrylic on canvas, 2011

CHAPTER 4: THE COMPUTER

Internet searches and television news media have contributed to the research of images and iconography for my recent works. The computer's convenient access to: photographs I have taken, historical art images and various writings make it an important part of my workspace. A year or so ago, I had considered utilizing the computer, to work on a different level by creating simple animations of the visual noise from my paintings in the *Carnaval* series. But, although the animations were humorous and entertaining, I felt they did not contain the large, physical presence of an actual painting, nor would they hold any mystery or longevity of the traditional canvas.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

I have learned more than ever that I love to paint, and to use the materials and formal qualities to create imaginative images that are unique to me. My motivation to combine multi-cultural and historical influences with my personal life experiences, has been, and will continue to inspire and enhance my work.

In each of the series I have painted, visual noise is noticeably different. I realize the subjects and their relationship to me can influence the amount of noise I choose to create. I believe, most of all that the amount of noise added to my canvas is directly proportional to the static animation, humor, irony, and entertainment evident in the work.

Being free to employ my own juxtaposition of space, use of vibrant color, pattern making, ornamentation, and iconography are formal choices, not psychological or philosophical responses to the “Horror Vacui.” The canvases are filled because they mirror my love of painting.

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